THE FIRST YEAR IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY
ON LOW ACHIEVING 7TH AND 8TH GRADE STUDENTS

A Thesis by

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I have examined the final copy of this Thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Master with a major in Curriculum and Instruction.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to measure the impact on low achieving learners within the first year implementation of a professional learning community in a large suburban middle school located in the Midwest. Interventions through collaborative efforts were devised for low achieving learners and implemented. Grade trends for students earning below average and failing grades in all subject areas in the 7th and 8th grade were examined from each quarter of the previous four years and compared to grades from 833 students through the end of the second quarter after implementing intervention strategies during the 2005-2006 school year. Surveys were completed from 38 staff and 350 students.

Preliminary analyses of student and staff survey data were examined for violation of normality. Both data sets violated assumptions of normality using Shapiro Wilks statistics (all *ps* <.001). Reliability for student surveys were calculated for internal consistency values and yielded an adequately reliable value of .71. Staff surveys were also examined and yielded an internal consistency value of .92. Student surveys separated composite variables correlating questions relating positive school climate as well as positive attitudes towards interventions during the implementation process of the professional learning community. Staff surveys exposed two composite variables reflecting positive responses in the area of personal teaching reflection and classroom management as well as school climate during the same period. Data examined from student grade data showed a statistically significant decline in the percentages of failing grades (F's) and no significant decrease in D's for both 7th and 8th grade students using a Welch t-test when comparing the year with professional learning community interventions with the previous four years. Establishing a professional learning community was found to improve success for low achieving learners within the first semester of implementation.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF TABLES

CHAPTER ONE

THE PROBLEM

The low achieving student is a group of students all quality schools should target for improvement. Students who don't qualify for special education programs and students who don't have an identified learning disability often fall through the cracks in the education system and move to the next level of school having earned below average or failing grades. These students are an identifiable at risk group in which schools should implement interventions for support, especially those who repeat a pattern of low success in the classroom.

Educators at all levels examining school improvement throughout the past find that schools lack the supportive culture to improve student learning. To achieve significant gains in teaching and learning, the needs of all students must be addressed, but especially the challenging needs of students who fail in schools and often fall through the gaps in current classroom environments. Many teachers remain isolated within their own classrooms, ill equipped for ensuring the success of all learners. Leadership in schools is frequently at a loss for helping teachers address these concerns. Critical learning needs of students, teachers, and school leaders must be approached in a more meaningful and productive setting.

Professional learning communities provide a framework to meet these issues through collaborative efforts which involve every person in the educational process. A professional learning community contains three main properties evident through school practice: (a) collaboratively developed shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (b) collaborative teams working to accomplish common goals, (c) a focus on results evident through dedication to continued improvement (Eaker *et al.*, 2002). By sharing and practicing successful instructional strategies and developing new plans of action to meet the needs of students, professional learning

1

communities have potential for becoming a means to an end by enhancing student improvement. In a professional learning community the entire group of professionals come together to support learning within a supportive community. This community of learners is self-created based on the particular needs within the school, and unlike many school re-culturing initiatives, is self-correcting and adaptive.

Hord (1997) conceptualized the idea that there is no universal definition for a professional learning community, but based on extensive review of literature on the topic, outlined that professional staff as a whole operates along five guidelines: (a) supportive and shared leadership, (b) shared values and vision, (c) collective learning and application of learning, (d) supportive conditions, (e) shared personal practice

Establishing a professional learning community cannot take place overnight. The first requirement is dedication and effort from administration and teaching staff. There are many dynamics which develop at their own pace. Self-correction and openness between staff is crucial to the successful implementation of this model.

<div align="center">Purpose</div>

The purpose of this research was to follow the implementation process of a large urban middle school in the first year of developing a professional learning community. First year effects on low achieving students were examined to determine the rate of the impact created by collaborative efforts such as the implementation of a "Focus Encor" providing a guided study hall for these students. Other interventions such as double enrolling failing students will be examined. Survey results from students, teachers, and administrative personnel provided guidance to check the pulse of progress made within one school year. Results were to be used not only for building improvement data, but for identifying needed changes for the next phase

entered into by a learning community. There is also hope that this research can serve as a model to provide struggling school districts with ideas to improve student learning.

Research Questions

Professional learning communities are a vehicle for school reform and involve effective teaching practice which can have an impact on students and teachers. For this study investigating the first year impact of a professional learning community on low achieving students, several questions were developed:

- Question 1: Are there changes in grade trends (i.e., number of D's and F's) during the implementation year compared to the previous years? Are there differences based on grade level (between 7th and 8th graders)?

- Question 2: Are there differences in learning attitudes based upon group membership (i.e., those having attended Focus Encor [see operational definitions on page 4] compared to those who have not) as related to school climate?

- Question 3: Do teachers report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community?

Hypotheses

Previous literature on the study of professional learning communities lead to the develop several hypotheses to support each question:

- Hypothesis 1: Implementing a professional learning community will have a positive impact on low achieving learners.

- Hypothesis 2: Student attitudes will reflect that the implementation of a professional learning community supports a positive learning environment.

- Hypothesis 3: The teaching climate for educators will show positive growth improving the school atmosphere within a professional learning community.

Definitions

Bull's Eye Effect: Reaching the goal of meeting the requirements of establishing viable curriculum.

Core teachers: Licensed staff teaching in the areas of social studies, math, English, or science.

Encor: A forty-two minute period at the end of the regular school day that students use for enriching curriculum time with homework completion, re-teaching, or reading. This guided study-hall is assigned to all students and is supervised by classroom teachers.

Focus Encor: An intervention strategy for low achieving students which coincide with the regular Encor. Students referred by teachers who are receiving a failing grade in any subject report to core teachers for re-teaching on a weekly basis during this forty-two minute period at the end of the day.

Individualized Educational Plan: Special education services provided to students supported by Kansas State law.

Low achieving students: Students who fail any subject at the 7th or 8th grade level in any course reported by the letter grade of "F."

National Assessment of Educational Progress: The only measure of student achievement in the United States where you can compare the performance of students in your state with the performance of students across the nation or in other states – also known as the Nation's Report Card.

No Child Left Behind: Federal Law passed in 2002 governing the attempts to close the achievement gap by providing resources to provide a quality education to all American students.

Phase I: The first year of the middle school professional learning community concurrent with the school year 2005-2006.

Phase II: The second year of the middle school professional learning community planned for the school year 2006-2007.

Poverty level: The minimum income level below which a person is officially considered to lack adequate subsistence and to be living in poverty.

Professional Learning Community: A strategy for school improvement implemented by school personnel characterized by: (a) shared mission, vision, goals, and values, (b) collaborative teams, and (c) a focus on results (Eaker et al., 2002).

School Culture: The combined attitude, ethics, and values evident by the nature of the students, teachers, administration, and support staff in a school.

School policy: Regulations and procedures implemented by school administration and supported by the mission and goals of the school district as adopted by the superintendent of schools and local board of education.

Staff Academy: Summer workshops provided to teachers with pay for attended courses to enhance knowledge of school personnel such as technology classes, classroom management techniques, or school improvement issues.

Support staff: Para-professionals, and school counselors.

Assumptions and Limitations

Assumptions

The first assumption is that the district in question is staffed with personnel willing to commit to the development of a professional learning community. In a large urban school district it is inevitable that out of the currently employed licensed teaching professionals that there are

diverse attitudes and opinions regarding the acceptance of change. In addition to teacher participation, teachers must also be willing to lead to build a successful professional learning community.

Another assumption is that administrative personnel provide a supportive school environment for a professional learning community. In addition to adapting school schedules, a diverse steering committee of teachers capable of providing direction to the collaborative process must be carefully formed. Defining the shared values and goals within the school should be coordinated in order to find a starting point for the mission of the professional learning community. Administrators open to dialogue concerning the changes taking place within the school is imperative.

A third assumption is that changes seen in student achievement can be tied directly to changes taking place within the school due to the professional learning community. A school wide effort should reflect school wide change. Curriculum must not only be re-examined, but methodology of delivering instruction and implementing special programs to target low achieving learners should be developed in a meaningful way. Analysis of what the school currently practices well and areas of improvement must be honestly evaluated.

A fourth assumption is that surveys provided to students, faculty, and administrators provided an accurate looking glass into the school climate. Respondents must honestly and accurately answer questions developed to measure attitudes and impact. It would also be an assumption that each returned survey was actually completed by the person addressed, and that the opinions of those involved is protected.

Limitations

This research is limited to one middle school building within this large school district studied. Because the professional learning community was developed around the needs of this particular school, other districts or buildings using results for possible avenues of improvement should internally reflect on the needs at their individual schools. It is not likely that the model provided by the studied school will necessarily be representative of any other typical learning community at other schools.

Research conducted monitored the progress of a newly formed professional learning community but can only recommend steps for continued improvement. There are no concrete formulas for success of a learning community. Willingness to continue the progress of this work is ultimately in the hands of the teachers and their commitment to the school.

This study is also limited to the currently enrolled students involved in this study. Any teacher can attest that each graduating class has its own challenges and "personality." What works for one group of students may reflect different results from upcoming groups of students. Other limitations of the review of student data include:

- Standardized tests have changed frequently for this school recently and have been completed at different times.
- The numbers used for the total number of grades given does not include the courses students take outside of the building at the high school campus.
- School policy does not allow identification of the number of students who are within the poverty level enrolled in the school.
- Identification of students receiving individualized educational plans cannot be segregated for evaluative purpose.

- This study observed changes within the learning community in the first half year of implementing the professional learning community. Literature for the time frame for achieving increases in student performance is usually over a several year period.

- There are so many variables the researcher may not be aware of that there is likely to be inadvertent omission of contributing factors.

Overview

The following chapter will review relevant literature to the development of this thesis. The third chapter will outline the methods used in this study. The findings and discussion of the results of this study are included in the fourth and fifth chapters, respectively.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The need for changes in education comes from pressures that are driven by all levels; national, state, and local. Much of the emphasis in driving school reform today is based on readily available research findings. Also readily available are structures for schools to model which are simple, proven, and affordable, which can impact student achievement (Schmoker, 2004). Professional learning communities are a trend gaining the attention of schools as a method of re-culturing education from within.

Professional learning communities are groups examining, analyzing and reforming collaboration of educational practice. Within this community of learners there are roles for everyone to play, including administrators, teachers, students, and even support personnel. Founding a professional learning community with a common mission and vision followed by setting values and goals is crucial to the implementation a professional learning community.

The focus of the mission and goals of any educational institution should ultimately be student centered. Poor performing schools as well as good and great schools can all find areas to improve student achievement as long as there is openness in dialogue between teachers and administrators. The stakes are high and there is much to lose for not reaching success within our schools.

To begin, issues concerning a need for school improvement will be weighed. Literature defining and outlining a typical professional learning community will be examined. And finally, factors concerning low achieving students will be identified.

The Review

School Reform

The track record of education in the United States is increasingly under scrutiny and current National Assessment of Educational Progress, known as the nation's report card, shows that while there have been signs of progress, certain areas of concern show only minimal change (NAEP finds mixed results on student achievement, 2005). School reform initiatives in this modern era of education have shown the need for improvement. One of the failures of contemporary reform that has been cited is that although there may have been a call for intensification of existing practices, they contained no new ideas for meeting these needs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Accountability of schools has been affected by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in the past four years. The NCLB legislation was designed to change American school culture by closing the achievement gap through the provisions of a flexible education and the teaching of students using effective teaching strategies. Under these provisions, states must define strategies as to how they are closing the achievement gap and make sure all students achieve academic proficiency. This requires schools to produce annual state and district report cards to inform the public about school progress. Schools that are not making adequate yearly progress after five years must make dramatic changes to the way the school is run (Education, 2006). The National Education Association is one group which has criticized the NCLB Law and has pushed to transform the law by proposing changes which they feel will help children learn (Jehlen, 2006).

The NCLB effects increased for the school in this study have been reported by the U.S. Department of Education to have increased student performance in several areas within the past four years since implementation. Fifth grade reading proficiency has increased by ten percentage

points; Fourth Grade mathematics proficiency increased thirteen percentage points; the black-white achievement gap has narrowed in areas such as fifth-grade reading and fourth-grade mathematics; the Hispanic-white achievement gap has closed in fifth-grade reading and fourth-grade mathematics. Preliminary 2005 state test scores for a district neighboring the school in this study has reported increases in fifth-grade reading and tenth-grade math (USDE, 2006).

According to Stolp (2005) there are two kinds of school reform. One type of reform is based on the school's subject matter and teaching methods; the other is centered on school administration and governance procedures. To directly impact students, reform in curriculum and instruction is where the tread truly meets the road. In other words, in an era where the way students are taught affects achievement defined by standards, the methods and content of teaching is a logical place to begin.

Greater demands on students to perform since the 1970's through today have put pressure on schools to be competitive by jumping on the reform bandwagon. Technology and research have been causing unprecedented change in the core methods and applications of quality education in a competitive world market today (Jennings, 1995). The systemic reform of the 1990's was guided by providing a more challenging curriculum in all subject areas to ensure the achievement of all students and can be reduced down to the essential goals of standards and equity (Wasser, 1998).

Disregarding public relations and accountability issues, educators have come to the realization that they can no longer be reliant on maintaining status quo in the decision making process of how to improve student achievement (Wade, 2001). District leaders should encourage and support schools as reflective communities to respond to specific teacher and student needs

(Darling-Hammond & McLaughland, 1995). In a supportive school system, educators can be free to use data to drive changes that impact students, although this takes time.

The time frame for achieving successful change in student performance can range from three years in an elementary school to six years in a secondary school depending on the size (Fullan, 2000). This delayed gratification lends itself to a school culture in which only organizations with a passion for learning will have enduring influence (Covey, 1996). By having expertise at dealing with change as a way of life is one way for educators to deal with this problem (Fullan, 1993).

Importance of the school culture should be considered in the reform process. School culture is centered upon internal conditions of the school community providing information on what is important to the school, how the school goes about doing this work, and how people in the school community relate to each other (Johnson, 1999). If schools want to increase their organizational capability to increase student achievement, they should work on building a professional learning community that is identified by shared purpose, collaboration, and collective responsibility among faculty (Newmann & Wehlage, 1996).

Professional Learning Communities

As mentioned in the first chapter, there is no clear definition of a professional learning community. The conceptual framework for a professional learning community has been provided by many researchers in this area. As for the district studied, the familiar framework was outlined by Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour (2002) as: (a) Collaboratively developed and shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (b) Collaborative teams that work to achieve common goals interdependently, (c) Focused on results through commitment to continuous improvement.

To support this framework, schools must be organized in ways that motivate their faculty, continually improve skills, and lead personnel to facilitate collaboration to reach goals (Patchen, 2004). Staff development must be centered on a process in which a community of learners accept joint responsibility for the learning of all students and in which teachers meet regularly to learn, plan, and provide support for each other for continuous improvement (Sparks, 1999). In the context of high-performing schools, there are many roles to be played by members in a professional learning community to ensure its success.

Administrators have the responsibility of creating a professional community of teachers who are learners and problem solvers within their school (Langer, 2004). Effective teams termed by Richardson, Blackbourn, Ruhl-Smith, & Haynes (1997) as "quality management teams" are a group of 6-20 selected people who are willing to take responsibility for the learning process. These authors cite reasons for developing these teams and define effective teams as shown in Appendices A and B.

All teachers are crucial to this process, but resistance to change can also be a stumbling block. Teachers can hold strongly to their ideologies and show little loyalty to the school as a whole by remaining within their own cliques (Blankstein, 2004). Other pitfalls to this process can meet resistance by teachers who feel loss of prestige, obsolescent skills, and even fear of the unknown (Richardson et al., 1997). Literature also notes impediments coming from the autonomous nature of some teachers, competition between teachers, and refusal to adjust to the ideas of other staff members (Patchen, 2004). Marzano (2003) supports that leadership can counter these problems by providing optimism, honesty, and consideration within the groups that drive school change.

The effectiveness of professional learning communities is apparent by well documented case studies and research. The literature on the impact of professional learning communities reveals improvements in not only attitudes and morale of teachers within schools, but increased achievements of students. Goals set by the schools studied revealed that what was targeted to improve through the learning community in the school was reflected in results over time.

One such school district case studied was Twin Falls School District #411, Twin Falls, Idaho (Eaker et al., 2002). After challenges in the district spanning from the late 1980's to 1999, extensive teacher collaboration yielded significant growth on testing results, grades, and other classroom sources from 1995 to 1999. One of the elementary schools within the district achieved a 40% gain in writing tests and significant improvement in percentile ranking in mathematics improving from 56th percentile in 1996 to 86th percentile in 1997. At the high school level writing assessments improved from 38% passing to 88% passing in 1999. This case study attributes professional learning communities to these improvements by developing a common belief system throughout the district as well as building a commitment to accountability. They clearly identified essential curriculum, utilized effective instructional strategies through collaboration, designed assessment systems to measure student learning, and focused on a reporting system to communicate to students and parents each child's progress as related to outcomes.

Findings from a study of 8,500 teachers in 354 public and Catholic schools revealed that the stronger the sense of community among teachers in a school, the higher the morale (Patchen, 2004). Surveys that measured morale in this study were based on responses to a questionnaire conducted of teachers within the schools. Within schools with a strong sense of community, it was found that not only was student achievement on tests higher, but there was a reduced rate of

dropouts when collegial interaction reinforced consistent practice. Separating the cause and effect relationship between greater achievement and the sense of community within a professional learning community may be difficult to establish within this protocol. Either way, success has potential to beget success in a professional learning community scenario.

Collaborative efforts are also effective at targeting low achieving students and at refining curriculum. A case study involving school wide collaborative interventions at Adlai Stevenson High school showed that guided study hall for low achieving students effectively addressed academic problems for 95% of the students in the school (Blankstein, 2004). Teams of teachers studied by Judith Warren in the 1980's pointed out that in a Johnson City, New York, high school, refining curriculum in math produced a gain from 47% passing the Regents Examination to 93% (Schmoker, 2004b).

Teachers new to the profession also gain benefit through collaboration. Data on valued strategies to assist beginning teachers from two studies ranging from 2003-2004 revealed that providing new teachers with collaboration was one of the contributing factors to their success (Gilbert, 2005). By helping teachers new to the profession succeed as well as benefiting all students within the school system, professional learning communities hold great promise. By focusing on student achievement through collaboration, there are many related benefits to the learning environment.

Low Student Achievement

There are many problems which need to be addressed concerning low student achievement. Problems in schools concerning dropout rates, class size, homework time, and issues with achievement gaps all contribute to failing students. Hilty (1988) stated, "The tragedy is that those children who most need successful school experiences for safe passage to adulthood

are those for whom these experiences are most often characterized as 'failures'" (p. 76). The current demands of state and federal mandates require struggling schools to provide solutions which target low student achievement.

Staggering dropout rates are evident in some schools such as the 52% four year completion rate of students in Houston high schools during the 1990's (Holland, 2005). The graduation rate for the district studied in this thesis was reported as 86.5% in both the years of graduates in 2003 and 2004 (District information, 2005). Although these numbers do not seem as daunting as the dropout rates in Texas, the mission our district sets as one of their strategic objectives is that every student will graduate. The action plan to achieve the studied district's mission is established in the foundation of the district's "Journey to Excellence" plan in Appendix C (Journey to excellence: Soaring to new heights, 2005).

Recent research on class-size has indicated that achievement increases the smaller the class size (Molnar, 2000). The most recent data on student/teacher ratio for the studied district is 19.3 (District information, 2005). Although class size may be difficult to change through collaborative efforts from teachers, interventions for low achieving students can initiate programs which place smaller groups of students with core teachers for directed study time.

A synthesis of more than a dozen studies of the effects of homework in various subjects showed that assignment and completion of homework yielded positive effects on academic achievement (Walberg, 1995). In a review of research on recommended homework time, it is recommended that middle level students study from 50 to 120 minutes per day (Marzano *et al.*, 2001). Schools allowing time to spend during the school day for homework would improve the completion rates of work from students which could have implications on closing achievement gaps.

Research on the achievement gap on 15,618 American students from across the country in a ten year study from 1990-2000 determined that knowledge about each student trumps school policy when considering school-based factors and home-based factors contributing to student achievement (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005). To value and support learners, we must know them. Tomlinson (2003) suggests that we serve students better by caring for them while simultaneously expecting more from them through responsive teaching.

While many of the references cited include influences of professional learning communities, the learner should still be the focus of education. Schools have changed less in the past three decades than young people have changed and many students disengage from the learning process because the conditions for learning in schools do not always support the development of all young people as learners (Rudduck & Flutter, 2004). After identifying students in need of help, circumstances that could trigger change should be considered when planning interventions. Data on students within the school must be analyzed on an individual basis to meet the needs of all learners.

One of the difficulties in comparing data on low student achievement is that student achievement in the past cannot always be compared accurately with student achievement today (Rothstein, 1997). Not only are we measuring a different group of students in the present, but the baseline for measuring student achievement continues to change with changing tests. While this should not discourage schools from the reform process, it would be difficult for any school to undergo change without being aware of current school data. The district of this study is currently focusing on curriculum and low student achievement in their newly formed professional learning community. Although the building researched is currently accredited in their resident Midwest state, they are continually striving to meet the standards of excellence in state tested areas.

Summary

The literature has revealed that school reform and re-culturing schools has potential for success through the implementation of professional learning communities. The prospect of having a positive impact on low student achievement through a community of learners is appealing to schools with the desire to make change. Professional learning communities have been shown to be a balance between school structure, organization, and time.

As educators, we are continually striving to improve the learning environment for our children. There are advantages to collaboration although collaborative efforts must be well planned with roles that are dependant on all of the participants within the learning community. In a supportive school district and in a building prepared to make the commitment to change, building a professional learning community seems to be a logical approach to improving our schools.

Quality schools cannot afford to ignore the needs of their students. The shared mission of a school should be centered on the learner. Collaborative teams should work interdependently to achieve common goals. By focusing on the learner, professional learning communities can move toward continuous school improvement.

To this end, the current study sought to address the aforementioned research questions: Are there changes in grade trends (i.e., number of D's and F's) during the implementation year of a professional learning community compared to the previous years? Are there differences based on grade level? Are there differences in learning attitudes based upon group membership (i.e., those having attended Focus Encor compared to those who have not) as related to school climate? Do teachers report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community?

CHAPTER THREE

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

The 7th and 8th grade middle school that is the subject school in this study is currently in

its first year of developing a professional learning community. The methodology included in this

research outlines the developmental process of re-culturing the school. To measure the impact of

this change on low achieving students, several parameters are to be addressed. Intervention

methods targeting low achieving students were monitored through the first semester of school.

Surveys reflecting school climate were given to all students, faculty, and administration at the

end of the first semester; completion of the surveys was voluntary.

Sample

Participants

Participation in the changes developed by the professional learning community at the

school studied was mandatory and has been integrated into regular school policy. Students,

faculty, administration, and support personnel were all an integral part of this process and

collegiality was honored by reflecting the input from all of the participants. This population of

participants includes a total of 833 students enrolled in 7th and 8th grade the middle school in a

large suburban school district in the Midwest, 50 licensed teachers, two school counselors, three

administrative personnel, and eight para-professional employees.

The students at this middle school included a population of 421 males (50.54%), and 412

females (49.46%). Fifty students (6.00%) were under Individualized Educational Plans receiving

special education services such as study skills classes (this number does not represent gifted

students). The demographics of the school population included 718 whites, 51 Hispanics, 23

Asian, 22 black, and 19 other (Natural Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders/Native American) students

(Sasixp, 2003). Demographics on the number of students receiving free and reduced lunch to reflect socio economic information on the student population were not permitted by the school district for this study. Surveys provided to all students who consented yielded 350 completed surveys for data analysis.

Sampling Duration

The information collected on student grade data was analyzed from the school years spanning from the 2001-2002 school year through the end of the first semester in the 2005-2006 school year. Surveys were administered to all students during their Encor/Focus Encor classes at the end of the first semester in January, 2006. Surveys for staff, administration, and support staff were also administered at the end of the first semester in January.

<center>Instrument</center>

Measurement and Instrument

In the spring of 2005, several teachers and administrative personnel from the middle school attended a conference by Dr. Richard DuFour and Rebecca DuFour in a neighboring school district on April 25-26, 2005. The topic of the conference was Professional Learning Communities at Work. Teachers were selected by the administration in May, 2005, to meet during a summer staff academy in June to discuss the prospect of forming a professional learning community at the middle school. A team of nine teachers including representation from each core subject area and two school counselors, met with the principal to engage in collaboration centered on the direction of the school.

During the June meeting, open and honest discussion began with reflection on the school. Discussion included a simple forum that identified what the school currently did that was good, and areas where our school could improve. The consensus was established that the school was a

great place to work. Positive characteristics that were identified were high student involvement in extra-curricular activities including sports and academic teams. The students usually excel in these outside of school activities and we have strong student leadership in our school. Among our student population, the students were identified that were actively involved in productive activities away from the school environment. The evaluation of teacher efforts concluded that the school staff was genuinely a close group of people who work well together. Shortcomings of the school that were identified included that current programs failed to reach all learners, particularly the low achieving student population. These students were often not involved in the same activities as the productive students.

The school district's mission to chart the course for the future of their schools has been developed. This detailed mission provides focus on the district's goals in what is called "Journey to Excellence – Soaring to New Heights" (Appendix C). As the teachers at the middle school considered a mission statement they realized that the picture of what their professional learning community would look like would unfold through the course of time during the first year in what they would refer to as Phase I. While sharing the overall goals of the district, the newly formed professional learning community committee concluded that success is the only option and they were prepared to lead each curricular area through the first year.

To support collaboration between teachers for the upcoming 2005-2006 school year and to address concerns relevant to the low achieving students, the school schedule was re-structured (Appendix E). Formerly, the schedule had in place a twenty-five minute block during the last period of the day called Encor, which students used for study time and to engage in intramural activities. The new schedule allowed for the lengthening of this period to 44 minutes. Effects of this schedule change were separated in the data analysis by comparing both student grade data as

well as analysis of student/staff surveys with questions measuring effects of the ongoing professional learning community.

Initially Encor was loosely structured and each teacher devised their own rules for students within this period. At the beginning of the year teachers collaboratively agreed on a school wide policy for teachers to use as a procedural guideline within their Encor classrooms (Appendix F). The bell schedule was altered to lengthen this time to a forty-two minute period. Teams were assembled by subject area and cross-curricular areas and a calendar with scheduled collaboration time was developed (Appendix G).

Once a week, each core area was relieved from their responsibility to their Encor class by support staff to meet for collaboration. Team leaders from the original committee served to steer their subgroups during these meetings to continue the professional learning community process. This collaboration time was utilized for identification of non-essential curriculum for elimination and to implement lessons focusing on state tested items that needed improvement. Lesson plans offering successful teaching strategy were developed and shared during this time. This time was used to foster the professional learning community and to enable change. Impact was measured with key questions posed in the staff survey.

The professional learning community committee scheduled a time to meet each Thursday of the week, thirty minutes prior to the first period. This time was used to report concerns and self-correct during the Phase I school year. During this time, the committee identified concerns from departmental teachers and suggested what teachers from their area posed as possible solutions or brain-stormed ideas to take back to their respective departments for discussion. This process was utilized to promote buy in from teachers as well as involve every employee in the decision making process. Staff survey results measured the impact of the collaboration time.

For low achievers, the professional learning community committee established a Focus Encor. This was designed to fit within the forty-two minute Encor period. Core teachers from the professional learning community committee volunteered to be assigned students in their Focus Encor who were failing in any subject area. Teachers developed a list of students at risk by weekly reporting to the school counselor the names of students earning the letter grade of "F" in their respective classes. On Monday beginning each week, students on this list were reported to all teachers and were required to attend the Focus Encor classroom. These at risk students met in a centralized classroom and from there were separated by subject area to receive re-teaching and close supervision from the Focus Encor teachers. All students who stay out of Focus Encor are eligible to participate in any extra curricular activities including; sports, assemblies, school dances, or any other school related activity not related to receiving a grade in any content area (such as required choir performances for grades.) Participation in the Focus Encor group continued through the calendar week. Removal from the list at the end of the week re-instated all privileges for continued participation in activities for these students.

Special education students were provided study skill assistance within the existing programs (Individualized Educational Plans) and were excluded from selection in Focus Encor. At the beginning of the school year considerations were also made for students placed in the Focus Encor who appeared to have learning ability deficits as candidates for possible testing by appropriate school personnel to help identify potential special needs. This allowed for quick identification to exclude students from Focus Encor intervention based upon learning disabilities.

Additional interventions were developed for students who were "chronic" Focus Encor attendees. Any student that did not raise their grade above the letter grade of "F" within a three week period of assignment to the Focus Encor were sent to their referring curricular teacher for

alternative strategies for learning improvement. By using school data from the weekly Focus

Encor lists, school counselors looked at students who had four or more referrals from core

classes along with the time during the semester in which they were referred. The students who

were at risk for failing in a core subject area had their schedules changed to allow additional time

for application of concepts with their core teachers by double enrolling them with the same

teacher for their particular class. This provided opportunities for application of "concepts."

Elective classes were dropped to accommodate the schedule for double enrollment. Prior to the

end of the quarter, a letter was sent home to the parents of the students selected for double

enrollment explaining the procedures. Students were given opportunity to raise grades by the

end of the quarter to be dropped for selected double enrolling. In addition, students who were

double enrolled had the opportunity to regain their elective classes by improving their grades to a

passing level before the end of the quarter.

An analysis of the data and the programs that were utilized to evaluate these data are

discussed in the following chapter. The data reflects both scholastic performance (grades) and

qualitative perceptions (survey).

Data Collection

To answer the first question concerning grade trends (i.e., number of D's and F's) during

the implementation year compared to the previous years and differences based on grade level

(between 7th and 8th graders), several methods were used for data collection. Retrieval of school

data from past school years provided a comparison of past quarterly grades to current grades to

examine the "D's" and "F's" based upon the school-wide grading policy (Appendix D) through

the school information tracking program (Sasixp, 2003). Percentages of student grades scoring

"D" and "F" grade in these at risk categories were analyzed using a Welch t-test. In addition to

this comparison, quantitative data on the number of students reported to the Focus Encor group were tabulated to track the progress of students. Data from state assessments were excluded as they were not completed by the timeframe within of the study.

To answer the second question concerning differences in learning attitudes based upon group membership (i.e., those having attended Focus Encor as related to school climate and the third question concerning teacher attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community, surveys were administered to staff and students at the end of the first semester. Participants were ensured anonymity and surveys were completed on a voluntary basis. The surveys were developed through careful examination of school specific factors and review of pertinent literature on professional learning communities. Results from these surveys were examined for violations of normality and reliability was calculated. These data were used to provide a view of data specific objectives on impact and to reflect attitudes within the learning environment in the school.

During the collaborative process, communications that occurred during weekly professional learning community committee and departmental meetings were recorded. These annotations were made to reflect the self-correcting process and to measure the ability to adapt to problems as they arose. This process identified problems, issues associated with these problems, and collaboratively developed solutions to the problems. Efforts were made to catalog continued problems that had not yet been solved by the end of this study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Quantitative data were collected and measured through appropriate statistical analysis models as well as an examination of recorded qualitative information. Within the students who participated in the study, 350 student surveys were returned with completed assent forms. This represented 39.3% of the students who have not used the Focus classroom intervention more than once during the first semester and 12.5% of the students who had utilized the Focus classroom intervention more than once within this same time period. Specifics on grade/gender data are provided in the preliminary analysis. Of the staff surveys distributed, 46 staff surveys were returned with a teacher completion rate of 76.0%. Grade level and gender differences were not segregated in survey data as many teachers teach classes at both levels and the school employs a predominant female population of teachers.

Preliminary and primary analyses were conducted on staff and student survey information as well as on student grade data on all students. Following the quantitative measurements, qualitative evaluations were made using the constant comparison method (Dye *et al.*, 2000). This method categorizes, compares, and inducts analysis using data bits and categories.

Preliminary Analyses: Student Data

Descriptive statistics for grade/gender and all measures are presented in Table 1. Descriptive statistics are arranged by group. The Focus group received intervention by placement into Focus Encor. The NonFocus group was the control group without the Focus Encor intervention.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics by Group

Group	Gender	Grade level	Sample Size
Focus Group	13 males, 10 females	18 7th graders 5 8th graders	23
NonFocus Group	197 males, 130 females	159 7th graders 168 8th graders	327

All data were examined for violations of normality. All items on the student survey violated assumptions of normality, with Shapiro Wilk statistics ranging from .32 to .69 (all ps <.001).

Next, the reliability of the survey used within the study was calculated. Internal consistency reliability refers to whether or not a test or theory assesses a single construct. This is usually assessed by examining how well the subset of items in a test correlate with each other. Internal consistency values that exceed .70 are considered to be adequately reliable (Cohen & Cohen, 1975). The student survey yielded an internal consistency value of .71.

Primary Statistical Analyses: Student Data

To address the first research questions (i.e., Are there changes in grade trends (i.e., number of Ds and Fs) during the implementation year compared to previous years? Are there differences based on grade level between 7th and 8th graders?), data regarding the number of Ds and Fs per nine weeks was gathered for the current academic year as well as for the past four academic years. These data were disaggregated by grade level as well. Table 2 illustrates the trend in grades.

Table 2

Student Grades for School Years 2001-2006 earning D's and F's by Quarter (Q)

Year	Grade	1st Q Ds	1st Q Fs	2nd Q Ds	2nd Q Fs	3rd Q Ds	3rd Q Fs	4th Q Ds	4th Q Fs	Total Grades
05-06	7	70	6	76	6	*	*	*	*	2359
05-06	8	137	20	153	27	*	*	*	*	3493
04-05	7	116	38	151	65	138	59	150	72	3549
04-05	8	154	31	156	54	136	38	150	42	3507
03-04	7	84	22	110	41	121	34	95	38	3514
03-04	8	139	40	119	55	115	38	145	26	3556
02-03	7	88	45	99	55	132	40	80	34	3486
02-03	8	156	65	149	86	156	73	167	62	3164
01-02	7	139	65	119	59	164	63	145	51	3227
01-02	8	146	50	119	60	163	66	140	53	3052

*denotes grades not recorded through end of research period

Percentages of student grades earning D's and F's for seventh and eighth grade students were analyzed using a Welch t-test. Considering the seventh grade students, the percentages of student grades earning D's indicated that the means of the grades during the professional learning community intervention did not show a significant decrease; $p = 0.11442$ (p-value > 0.05). The percentage of F's from this same group however, did reveal a statistically significant

decrease; p = 0.000000020524. In comparing the intervention year with previous years for the eighth grade data showed a similar result; student grades earning D's had a p-value of p = 0.4972 and grades earning F's resulted in a statistically significant lower number; p = 0.00098698.

To address the second research question (i.e., Are there differences in attitudes towards Focus Group and school climate based upon group membership?), examination of the relation between the multiple items on the student survey was conducted to assess for practicality and reasonability of the formation of composite variables. Bivariate correlations between the items are shown in Table 3. Statistically significant intercorrelations among items 1-4 and 5-10 were evident (*r*s ranged from .31 to -.11). Because of these correlations and because of conceptual appropriateness, the items on the survey that appeared to be addressing Focus group information were used to create a Focus Group composite variable. Likewise, the items on the survey that appeared to be addressing school climate were used to create a School Climate composite variable.

When examining the relations between the student survey items, several intercorrelations among the items were evident. This may indicate that some of these items relate to school climate at a more fundamental level; therefore, a principal component analysis for categorical data was conducted to determine if the larger set of items could be accounted for by a smaller set of components. The ten survey items that both groups responded to (i.e., items 1-10) were submitted to a principal component analysis with direct Oblimin rotation and Kaiser normalization. A two-component solution emerged. Survey items 1-4 loaded onto one component (i.e., subsequently named Focus Group) and survey items 5-10 loaded onto another component (i.e., School Climate). These results support the creation of composite variables. The composite variables were used for all remaining analyses.

To determine if there were group differences in students' ratings of Focus Group and School Climate, the Mann Whitney test for two group comparison was conducted. This test is the nonparametric alternative to analysis of variance (ANOVA) and was selected for use because the data gleaned from the student survey were not continuous in nature, but rather, were categorical, indicating that the data violated the assumptions for use of ANOVA. The results are reported in Table 4. When examining the mean ranks, it is critical to note how the data were dummy coded. "Yes" responses were scored as a "0" while "No" responses were scored as a "1", indicating that the higher the rank, the more "No's were reported on the survey.

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations Among Student Survey Items

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Item1	--									
2. Item2	.00	--								
3. Item3	.26***	-.04	--							
4. Item4	-.06	.17**	-.11*	--						
5. Item5	.00	.06	.05	-.01	--					
6. Item6	.07	-.25***	.00	.00	.00	--				
7. Item7	.12*	-.01	.12*	.05	.02	-.01	--			
8. Item8	.14*	-.08	.29***	-.03	.09	-.05	.08	--		
9. Item9	.15**	-.21***	.27***	-.09	.09	.15**	.07	.31***	--	
10.Item10	-.03	.04	.01	.03	.00	.05	.07	.03	.08	--

Note. N=10 items with 350 surveys completed. *=*p*<.05, **=*p*<.01, ***=*p*<.001

Table 4

Group Comparison of Ratings on Student Survey

Variable	Group	Mean Rank	Significance
Focus	1.00	168.23	p<.001
	2.00	278.83	
Climate	1.00	179.29	p<.006
	2.00	121.65	

Note. N=23 for group 2 and 327 for group 1.

Preliminary Analyses: Staff Data

Descriptive statistics for grade level and position are presented in Table 5. Descriptive

statistics are arranged by group.

Table 5

Descriptive Statistics For Staff

Group	Grade level	Sample Size
Teachers	8 seventh grade, 30 eighth grade	N=38
Other	8 seventh grade	N=8

All data were examined for violations of normality. All items on the teacher survey data

violated assumptions of normality (all ps<.001 using Shapiro Wilk statistics). Therefore,

nonparametric statistics were used.

Next, the reliability of the survey used within the study was calculated. The teacher

survey yielded an internal consistency value of .92.

Primary Statistical Analysis: Staff Survey Data

To address the third research question (i.e., Do teachers and related staff report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community?), teacher/staff survey data were examined. Bivariate correlations among the items on the survey were computed. As with the student survey data, several intercorrelations emerged. Results of a principal components analysis for categorical data (CATPCA) with the staff survey data revealed a two-component solution. The two components solution together accounted for 18.3% of the total variance. Variables were chosen for inclusion within a component on the basis of having the fewest cross-loadings and conceptual appropriateness (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The first correlation appeared to address questions related to school climate and were used to make a School Climate composite variable. Likewise, the second set of survey questions appeared to be addressing personal reflection in teaching and classroom management, and was used to create a Reflection/Classroom Management composite variable. The School Climate accounted for 12.3% of the variance in the data set. Reflection/Classroom Management accounted for 6.0% of the variance in the data set. These results indicate that the survey measures two underlying constructs. Because of the statistical outcome of the CATPCA, two composite variables were formed from the survey items that loaded onto each component. The information was reorganized by loading to facilitate interpretation (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

To determine if teachers, other staff, or administrators rated survey items housed within the composite variables differently, they were statistically examined using the Kruskal Wallis test. This test is an alternative to the independent group analysis of variance (ANOVA), when the assumption of normality or equality of variance is not met. This, like many non-parametric tests, uses the ranks of the data rather than their raw values to calculate the statistic. With this

nonparametric statistical test, gain scores are ranked from low to high (regardless of direction). The ranks associated with negative differences are summed and the ranks associated with positive differences are summed. The statistical test was then computed. This analysis determined if differing positions equated to statistically significant differences in ratings on the composite variables. Results indicated that the groups did not differ in their ratings of either School Climate (chi square = 1.885, $p<.397$) or for Reflection/Classroom Management (chi square =.217, $p<.897$).

To determine if grade level impacted ratings on the composite variables, a Kruskal Wallis test was conducted using grade level as the grouping variable. Results indicated that individuals working with seventh graders and those working with eighth graders did not differ in their ratings for School Climate (chi square = .32, $p<.57$) or Reflection/Classroom Management (chi square = .845, $p<.36$).

Based on these findings (i.e., that position or grade level did not statistically impact ratings on the composite variables. The data from all adult participants were pooled and analyzed together. The School Climate composite variable had a higher mean rating that did the Reflection/Classroom Management composite variable (i.e., 86.54, 36.16, respectively). This indicates that adult participants rated those items on the survey that loaded onto School Climate higher than those in the Reflection/Classroom Management.

Qualitative Data

In first addressing the first research questions (i.e., Are there changes in grade trends [i.e., number of Ds and Fs]) during the implementation year compared to previous years? Are there differences based on grade level?), grades were compared by grade level to differentiate trends between grade levels. Both 7th and 8th graders experienced a reduction in the total number of

grades recorded in the D and F scores. The most dramatic reduction occurred within the students within the 7th grade during the professional learning community implementation period. Grades of D also declined greatly within this group. Eight graders reduced the total number of F grades during the 2005-2006 school year during the first semester as well although grades at the D level showed significantly smaller change.

To address the second research question (i.e., Are there differences in attitudes towards Focus Group and school climate based upon group membership?), specific answers to survey questions are represented by percentages in Appendix H for the Focus Group and Appendix I for the NonFocus Group. Similarities and differences were noted between the Focus Group and the Non Focus Group. Common answers between the two groups responding were questions relating to the intervention of Focus Encor while differences were found when comparing attitudes toward school climate variables.

To address the third research question (i.e., Do teachers and related staff report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community?), staff surveys were computed to find percentages from each question response in Appendix J. Overall, impact of the professional learning community within the school appeared to have an impact on both school climate and within the personal reflective process and classroom management of the employees within the school.

Additional clusters of information were reported lending support to the research questions. The following categories of information were collected and are separated through inductive analysis through the themes of student motivation, Focus Encor evaluation, and professional learning community issues.

Student Motivation

A discrepancy was shown between the number of students completing the survey from the Focus Group and the Non Focus Group of students. Over three times the percent of students completed the student survey from the Non Focus Group. The week the surveys were distributed occurred during a week in which over 90 students were included in the Focus Encor intervention. After distributing surveys to Focus students in one of the two classrooms it was noted that several students apparently rejected the survey. One student note was intercepted from a student commenting that they hated focus and that it was a stupid idea. This student left the consent form on their desk when leaving at the end of the day along with several others. One student was denied a restroom privilege at five minutes before the end of the period and crumpled up the consent form in front of the teacher after the request was denied.

Focus Encor Evaluation

To better understand the demographics of the Focus Encor population, the number of students impacted by the intervention was compared with student lists from each week during the first semester. A total of 184 students utilized Focus Encor during the study period. Apparent sub-groups were noted from this group; 1-timers, rebounders, habitual, and chronic students. Figure 1 shows the comparison of students within these subgroups.

Figure 1
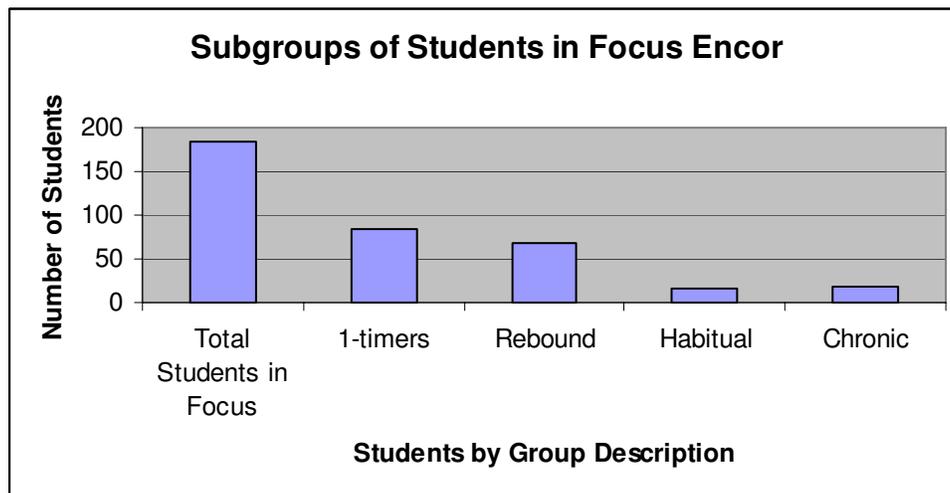
Students in the 1-timer group include only students who were placed in Focus Encor one time during the first semester grading period. Rebounders composed students who were placed in Focus two to five times within different periods of time during the first semester. Habitual Focus students were placed over five times but no more than 13 times during the first semester. These students were generally able to raise their failing grades by the end of the grading period and were not considered at risk for failure by the end of the grading period. From the Chronic Focus students, 18 individuals were identified as being at risk for grade failure by the end of the grading period based upon time of failing grades along with the frequency and number of referrals to Focus Encor. Students with four or more referrals within core classes were targeted for the additional intervention of double-enrolling.

School counselors sent letters home to parents (Appendix K) in mid-December and students were given the opportunity to get their grades up to passing level before the end of the semester to avoid double-enrolling thus losing an elective course for placement purposes. Of the 18 students originally referred, 11 students raised their grades to passing. The seven remaining students were double-enrolled in core classes including some with multiple double-enrolling. Out

of these seven Chronic Focus students, one student requested the double enrollment offer prior to the winter break in December and one student requested the double enrollment immediately after the break. These students were excited about this possibility as reported by the school counselor. After nine weeks of double-enrollment during the third quarter grading period, only two F's were reported from these students.

Grade differences were also noted by the administration after finalizing spring sports eligibility lists. According to the Kansas State High School Association rules students must be passing five of their seven classes to be eligible for athletic involvement. Only four students out of the total enrollment were excluded based upon these regulations which in the past was reported by the administration to involve 20-30 ineligible students. The principal credited this change to the work accomplished through Focus Encor.

Professional Learning Community Issues

During the collaborative process, problems developed involving unforeseen issues. These issues were reported by departmental groups, support staff, and the professional learning community committee personnel. Many of these concerns were discussed during weekly collaborative meetings. To address these needs, input was provided through staff problem solving and developing possible solutions. Communication between staff was logged and reported (Appendix L).

Communication for problem solving also included collaboration outside the designated collaborative time. Electronic mail, instant messaging, staff meetings, classroom phone calls, and hallway conversation provided other means to solving problems effectively. Some issues were readily solved while others are still ongoing at the time of this study.

Summary

To the following questions (a) Are there changes in grade trends (i.e., number of D's and F's) during the implementation year compared to the previous years? Are there differences based on grade level? (b) Are there differences in learning attitudes based upon group membership (i.e., those having attended Focus Encor compared to those who have not) as related to school climate? and (c) Do teachers report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community? Both statistical analyses of quantitative data and constant comparative analysis of qualitative data attempted to clarify the relationship between the implementation of a professional learning community and the effect on low achieving students. This study included varied sources of information to test the hypotheses that (a) Implementing a professional learning community will have a positive impact on low achieving learners, (b) Student attitudes will reflect that the implementation of a professional learning community supports a positive learning environment, and that (c) The teaching climate for educators will show positive growth improving the school atmosphere within a professional learning community.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study provided insight to the potential impact a professional learning community can have on a large suburban middle school in the Midwest. It is impossible to say that the results found by this school would be representative for other schools attempting to create change within their schools at the same level or at the same rate. The framework provided by the professional learning community in this study attempted to make evident the collaborative process through school practice. By following the pattern: (a) collaborative developed shared mission, vision, values, and goals, (b) collaborative teams working to accomplish common goals, and (c) a focus on results evident through dedication to continued improvement (Eaker et al., 2002), the school in this study attempted reform at the building level. This study showed that resources were available which can impact student achievement (Schmoker, 2004).

Available literature noted that the time frame for achieving successful change in student performance ranges from three to six years (Fullan, 2000). The time frame for this study spanned eighteen weeks during the first semester of school. During this research, the professional learning community seemed to show substantial improvement to student grades as well as reporting an overall positive school climate in both students and staff. This increase in organizational capability of a school to impact student achievement can be attributed to the work toward building of a professional learning community (Newmann & Wehlage, 1996).

The questions and hypotheses driving this study were (a) Are there changes in grade trends (i.e., number of D's and F's) during the implementation year compared to the previous years? Are there differences based on grade level? (b) Are there differences in learning attitudes based upon group membership (i.e., those having attended Focus Encor compared to those who

have not) as related to school climate? (c) Do teachers report positive attitudes towards school climate since the implementation of a professional learning community? and (a) Implementing a professional learning community will have a positive impact on low achieving learners, (b) Student attitudes will reflect that the implementation of a professional learning community supports a positive learning environment, and (c) The teaching climate for educators will show positive growth improving the school atmosphere within a professional learning community.

To the first hypothesis, implementing a professional learning community will have a positive impact on low achieving learners, grade data showed that immediate impact can be made with proper interventions. The number of failing students was decreased in both the seventh and eighth grade student grades during the intervention period. By extending the school day and providing a common supervised study period for all students including a classroom for at risk students supervised by core teachers, the study time can be created to provide the homework time needed by middle level students (Marzano et al., 2001). Positive effects on academic achievement can be yielded as the result of homework completion (Walberg, 1995). The number of students earning F's during this study declined which can prevent some students from the tragedy of failing to allow safe passage to adulthood (Hilty, 1998). Similiarly, Blankenstein (2004), reported that at the High School level, guided study hall successfully addressed the needs of 95% of the students in their school. This study did not measure achievement at the same grade level, but showed that the achievement gap can be narrowed between low achievers and other students. Additional interventions, including double enrolling students in core classes can be a positive influence on the success of students withou appearing to be "punishment" for poor academic success. These interventions show the creativity a professional learning community can provide.

Addressing the second hypothesis, student attitudes will reflect that the implementation of a professional learning community supports a positive learning environment, student survey data reported an impact on students in both Focus and Non Focus groups relating to a positive school climate and attitudes towards the Focus Encor implementation. Considering school climate factors, parent knowledge of intervention techniques and helpfulness of teachers reported by both groups of students support a positive learning environment. Both groups were also motivated by factors such as the implementation of the Focus Encor. Differences in motivation between the Focus and Non Focus group were evident in the lower number of students who reported they enjoyed school within the Focus group than compared to the latter. By knowing students we can value and support learners (Tomlinson, 2003). This knowledge of learners can also be stronger than school policy when considering student achievement (Ramirez & Carpenter, 2005).

The final hypothesis, the teaching climate for educators showed positive growth improving the school atmosphere within a professional learning community, was addressed by the staff survey. Positive responses to both school climate as well as questions related to personal reflection and classroom management were evident in this study. While discipline problems were not reported to decrease during the study period, other variables showed positive growth in the school atmosphere for the teachers in this research. The majority of teachers in the school report a positive attitude towards the collaborative nature of the developing professional learning community. The teachers in the school are supportive to one another and feel they have made progress during the study period through the collaborative process. The morale in schools can be related to the higher sense of community within the school (Patchen, 2004). Loss of autonomy did not seem to be problematic to the school climate as indicated by some researchers

(Richardson et al., 1997). The joint responsibility shared by the professional learning community can provide support for continued school improvement (Sparks, 1999).

Implications for Future Research

For educators striving to improve low student achievement, the implementation of a professional learning community should be an appealing option. All schools going through the process of starting a professional learning community should document the process and use data to drive the direction of reform within their schools. Although the school in this study discovered the immediate positive effects of a professional learning community can have in schools, several questions still arise.

For the students who are chronically referred to Focus Encor there seems to be few motivators for success. Based upon the survey results, only 39% of the Focus Encor students are involved in extra-curricular activities compared to 65% of the Non-Focus students. As a qualitative observation the Focus students seem to be referred due to failure to complete homework and not due to lack of ability based upon an identified learning disability. It would be recommended to have a dialogue with the chronic and habitual Focus Encor students to find strategies to motivate these students.

Based on the findings from this research, there are still improvements to be made in impacting student success and improving school climate. The collaborative process must be allowed to continue by re-evaluating the shared mission and goals of the school. Curriculum can further be revised by targeting areas needing improvement after examining state testing results (not available for the school studied by the end of the research). When data from state testing can gain reliability through longitudinal evaluation, the school district in this study can further measure the potential impact of their professional learning community. This will further show

how the student role in the professional learning community relates to learning outcomes and student performance.

Success for the implementation of a professional learning community is in the hands of the school administration and the teachers who are open to the changes which need to take place for collaborative efforts to be collected. The ability to self-correct is crucial to building of a community of learners through collaboration.

Another question that is important to look into is the effect increased student performance upon student drop-out rates. Will the increased success of students at the middle school level carry with them to the high school level? Will the number of students referred to alternative schools decrease if the students achieve more success at the middle level? A logical hypothesis would be that the impact of a professional learning community would make at least some level of impact on the students moving to the next grade level. These are further questions to be investigated.

This investigation did not differentiate between the total numbers of failing grades which were attributed to the same students. The total number of F grades decreased, but how many of these failing grades were earned by the same students? Double enrollment seemed to be successful for the Chronic Focus Encor students, but what are some intervention strategies which might help the Habitual Focus group and the Rebound students?

A closer examination could also be made of the curricular areas in which the students are failing. The core classes should be the focus for testing purposes, but how can the cross-curricular areas contribute to each other's success? The school in this study will implement cross-curricular strategies in the second phase of their professional learning community. How

will the impact of this strategy be measured? What other intervention strategies would be the best practice to further student achievement?

The school in this research is maintaining enthusiasm for the collaborative process. Studies evaluating whether or not the teachers in this building will be able to sustain their commitment to collaboration could be measured with future surveys.

Final Remarks

A unique environment exists in the building this study was conducted. Careful examination of the staff survey reveals the collaborative process to be ranked higher than teachers rank their own teaching and classroom management. The employees in the school are regarded in the district as people who are able to work well together and have a strong sense of community. Administrators in the building do not micro-manage the staff and have a leadership style based on doing what works and letting teachers and students assist in the decision making process. This approach by administration allows teachers to play a strong role with what will work with students while keeping working conditions reasonable for teachers.

Building a professional learning community can be well worth the reward of increasing student achievement. If the school in this study could provide ideas for other schools considering following its path, they would probably discover that they would develop their own autonomy through trial and error. What works for one school may not work for another based on the students in the district or the teachers who drive the collaborative process. The first step should be to share a common vision and then periodically revisit the goals of the school to keep in check with progress.

By sharing information discovered it is hoped that this research can help provide not only a pattern to follow but the inspiration to attempt building a professional learning community. The

implications of the results of this study will not only be an asset to the school district in this study but to other districts this information is shared with. Getting everyone on board to developing school wide collaboration has potential for solving problems with the debate over school reform at the national and state level to help all learners succeed.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

REASONS FOR HIGH-PERFORMING TEAMS

High-Performing Teams

Respond quickly to change

Deliver higher quality educational programs which are necessary to meet the Bull's Eye Effect

(quality in the past was often determined by non-educators rather than empowering teachers in

this process)

Constantly monitor and improve the existing program

Improve motivation, satisfaction, and productivity within the educational environment

Constantly learn, self-correct, and respond to opportunity

APPENDIX B

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE TEAMS

Characteristics of Effective Teams

Effective Teams

Share vision which everyone knows

Enable climate of trust and openness

Engage in open and honest communication

Have sense of belonging

Exhibit diversity

Are creative and risk-taking

Self-correct

Maintain interdependence

Make decisions by consensus

Participate in leadership

UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT #266 JOURNEY TO EXCELLENCE – SOARING TO NEW HEIGHTS

Mission

The mission of the Maize School District is to guarantee all students will acquire the critical skills necessary for success through an innovative, academically rigorous curriculum, facilitated by a visionary, progressive staff and an engaged community.

Belief Statements

We believe everyone has opportunities to make choices and is responsible for the outcomes.

We believe every individual has value and work.

We believe a supportive family is the foundation for building a healthy society.

We believe development of strong core character traits is essential to reach maximum individual potential.

We believe in the spiritual nature of mankind.

Strategic Objectives

All students will have perfect attendance with no tardies.

Every student will graduate.

All students will score at the exemplary level on all state assessments.

Parameters

We refuse to tolerate an unsafe learning environment.

We refuse to tolerate disrespectful behavior.

We refuse to accept complacency.

We refuse to accept student failure.

APPENDIX D

GRADING SCALE FOR UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT #266

90%-100%   A

80%-89%   B

70%-79%   C

60%-69%   D

59%-below F

APPENDIX E

MAIZE SOUTH MIDDLE SCHOOL ADJUSTED SCHOOL BELL SCHEDULE

Period 1:   7:45-8:31

Period 2:   8:36-9:18

Period 3   9:23-10:05

Period 4:   10:10-10:52

Period 5:   10:57-11:39

Period 6:   11:44-12:26

Period 7:   12:31-1:13

Period 8:   1:18-2:00

Period 9 (Encor/Focus Encor):   2:06-2:50

STUDENT ENCOR GUIDELINES FOR 2005-2006 SCHOOL YEAR

EnCor Rules

This year's EnCor will be a little different from past years. EnCor will still be at the end of the day, but it will be 44 min. long. This will allow students to work on assignments and projects and read more before going home from school. Students will be able to make arrangements for help and re-teaching from teachers and use the math lab and computer lab during EnCor. It will be a structured and quiet atmosphere to allow all students the opportunity to get things done. These rules will be applied in all EnCor classes and should be signed by students and parents.

1. Students are responsible for working on classroom assignments, projects, or reading each day. Each student must have in his/her possession: his/her agenda book, assignments to work on, and an outside reading book. If a student completes all work, he/she must read.

2. Visiting will not be allowed in EnCor. An atmosphere which will allow for good thinking, reading and working will be maintained at all times. If you need to ask a fellow classmate about an assignment, you must first have permission from the teacher.

3. Students needing to ask other teachers for help or re-teaching or needing to go to another teacher's classroom for make-up work must make arrangements and get a stamp from that teacher before EnCor time in order to go.

4. This year a special EnCor group will ensure that failure is not an option for all students at MSMS. Any student failing a class will be required to go to a Focus EnCor group for additional support and help.

In order to ensure that your child has shared these expectations with you, please sign below and return this letter. We are looking forward to a productive and positive EnCor period this year.

Sincerely,

_____
(EnCor teacher)

_____   _____
(parent/guardian signature)   (student signature)

_____   _____
(print name)   (print name)

APPENDIX G

COLLABORATIVE WEEKLY SCHEDULE BY DEPARTMENT

Week Day	Department
Monday	Science
Tuesday	English
Wednesday	Math
Thursday	Social Science

STUDENT SURVEY FROM FOCUS GROUP WITH PERCENTILES INDICATED FOR RESPONSE

STUDENT SURVEY - Professional Learning Communities

Please check mark the following spaces to indicate student information. Your name will not be used, only student information required for this study.

Grade: 78.3% 7th   21.7% 8th

Sex: 43.5% female   56.5% male

1) Would you agree that the 42 minute EnCor time at the end of each day is helpful to you in completing homework?

    91.3% yes   8.7% no

2) Have you been placed into the Focus EnCor class this year due to failing grade(s)?

    100% yes   0% no

3) Does the idea of being in Focus EnCor motivate you to keep your grades above failing?

    65.2% yes   34.8% no

4) Have you had at least 1 or more of your close friends in Focus EnCor this year (that you know of)?

    69.6% yes   30.4% no

5) Are your parents (or guardian) aware of what Focus EnCor is?

    87.0% yes   13.0% no

6) Are you (or have you been) involved in at least 1 sport or school activity (scholar's bowl, science Olympiad, etc.) during this school year?

    39.1% yes   60.9% no

7) Have you voluntarily visited other teachers other than your regular EnCor teacher this year to get help in a class?

    82.6% yes   17.4% no

8) Do you feel that most of your teachers are helpful to you when you ask them for additional help?

    78.3% yes   21.7% no

9) Would you say that for the most part that you enjoy school?

        52.2% yes   47.8% no

10) Do you wish that EnCor time provided more opportunities to take part in more clubs or activities?

        73.9% yes   26.1% no

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN PLACED IN FOCUS ENCOR **MORE THAN ONE TIME DURING THE *FIRST SEMESTER***:

11) Has Focus EnCor has been helpful in helping you to raise your grades?

        69.6% yes   30.4% no

12) Have you been in Focus EnCor more than half of the time you've been in school this year?

        17.4% yes   82.6% no

13) Have you ever been failing more than 1 class this year at the same time during Focus EnCor?

        52.2% yes   47.8% no

14) Are the Focus EnCor teachers helpful to you with your school work?

        60.9% yes   39.1% no

15) Do you think Focus EnCor is a good idea?

        56.5% yes   43.5% no

16) Have you ever had a discipline referral from your behavior during Focus EnCor?

        21.7% yes   78.3% no

17) Has Focus EnCor prevented you from participating in a school activity that you really wanted to do?

        56.5% yes   43.5% no

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Your results will be used to help us provide a better learning environment for you here at Maize South Middle School.

STUDENT SURVEY FROM NONFOCUS GROUP WITH PERCENTILES INDICATED FOR RESPONSE

STUDENT SURVEY - Professional Learning Communities

Please check mark the following spaces to indicate student information. Your name will not be used, only student information required for this study.

Grade:　　　　48.6% 7th　　　　　　51.4% 8th

Sex:　　　　　39.8% female　　　　60.2% male

1) Would you agree that the 42 minute EnCor time at the end of each day is helpful to you in completing homework?

　　　　86.5% yes　　　　　13.5% no

2) Have you been placed into the Focus EnCor class this year due to failing grade(s)?

　　　　6.4% yes　　　　　93.6% no

3) Does the idea of being in Focus EnCor motivate you to keep your grades above failing?

　　　　75.5% yes　　　　　24.5% no

4) Have you had at least 1 or more of your close friends in Focus EnCor this year (that you know of)?

　　　　54.4% yes　　　　　45.6% no

5) Are your parents (or guardian) aware of what Focus EnCor is?

　　　　82.6% yes　　　　　17.4% no

6) Are you (or have you been) involved in at least 1 sport or school activity (scholar's bowl, science Olympiad, etc.) during this school year?

　　　　65.1% yes　　　　　34.9% no

7) Have you voluntarily visited other teachers other than your regular EnCor teacher this year to get help in a class?

　　　　84.7% yes　　　　　15.3% no

8) Do you feel that most of your teachers are helpful to you when you ask them for additional help?

　　　　93.0% yes　　　　　7.0% no

9) Would you say that for the most part that you enjoy school?

        84.4% yes   15.6% no

10) Do you wish that EnCor time provided more opportunities to take part in more clubs or activities?

        72.5% yes   27.5% no

THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS ARE FOR STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN PLACED IN FOCUS ENCOR **MORE THAN ONE TIME DURING THE *FIRST SEMESTER***:

11) Has Focus EnCor has been helpful in helping you to raise your grades?

        * yes   * no

12) Have you been in Focus EnCor more than half of the time you've been in school this year?

        * yes   * no

13) Have you ever been failing more than 1 class this year at the same time during Focus EnCor?

        * yes   * no

14) Are the Focus EnCor teachers helpful to you with your school work?

        * yes   * no

15) Do you think Focus EnCor is a good idea?

        * yes   * no

16) Have you ever had a discipline referral from your behavior during Focus EnCor?

        * yes   * no

17) Has Focus EnCor prevented you from participating in a school activity that you really wanted to do?

        * yes   * no

Thank you for your participation in this survey. Your results will be used to help us provide a better learning environment for you here at Maize South Middle School.

    Note. *denotes questions not required by NonFocus group

APPENDIX J

STAFF SURVEY WITH VALID PERCENTILES INDICATED FOR RESPONSE

STAFF SURVEY – Professional Learning Communities

Please indicate that you are one of the following:

82.6% : teacher   4.3% : administration   13.1%: other support staff

1) I have placed a student in Focus Encor during the first semester

65.2% yes   34.8% no

For the following questions, please circle the number in front of each item that indicates the degree to which you think our school has had an impact on student learning or your profession as a result of your participation in our professional learning community (PLC) during the first semester during the school year 2005-2006.

Key:
1 = No impact at all *or* I disagree completely
2 = slight impact *or* I disagree somewhat
3 = some impact *or* I agree somewhat
4 = definite impact *or* I agree completely

SCALE	ITEM	ITEM NO.
1 2 3 4 20.0%4.4%37.0%37.0%	I have revised curriculum in my content area and have achieved more focus on learning objectives	1.1
1 2 3 4 17.8%15.6%48.9%17.8%	I have revised curriculum in my content area and have eliminated non-essential learning objectives	1.2
1 2 3 4 2.3%25.0%45.5%27.3%	I have seen improvement in students who are low achieving	1.3
1 2 3 4 37.8%20.0%24.4%17.8%	I have decreased discipline problems in my classes	1.4
1 2 3 4 25.0%50.0%13.6%11.4%	I have seen improved writing assignments due to the effects of the collaboration in our school	1.5
1 2 3 4 13.3%20.0%26.7%40.0%	I have more success with students turning in homework this year with the longer Encor period	1.6
1 2 3 4 13.0%10.9%28.3%47.8%	I enjoy having the extended Encor period this year	1.7
1 2 3 4 15.9%27.3%43.2%13.6%	Students are more motivated due to my teaching practices this year	1.8
1 2 3 4 2.2% 8.9% 51.1%37.8%	Comments from my colleagues considering collaboration are positive	1.9
1 2 3 4 4.5% 4.5% 31.8%59.1%	I prefer collaboration with my colleagues rather than being isolated in my teaching	1.10

63

1 2 3 4 0.0% 4.4% 31.1% 64.4%	I believe we have made progress this year through collaboration	1.11
1 2 3 4 8.9% 15.6% 26.7% 48.9%	I have learned more about how my colleagues teach this year	1.12
1 2 3 4 81.8% 13.6% 4.5% 0.0%	I feel like I have lost privacy this year in my teaching in a negative way	1.13
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 15.6% 84.4%	What we do as teachers really matters to the learning of our students	1.14
1 2 3 4 4.5% 6.8% 40.9% 47.7%	All children can indeed perform at high levels in some areas	1.15
1 2 3 4 0.0% 2.2% 35.6% 62.2%	I am equipped with the knowledge to improve the learning of all students	1.16
1 2 3 4 2.2% 8.7% 45.7% 43.5%	Our school has a system for quickly identifying students with academic needs who are low achieving	1.17
1 2 3 4 2.2% 8.7% 47.8% 41.3%	Our school has a continuum of support strategies for low achieving students	1.18
1 2 3 4 2.2% 10.9% 26.1% 60.9%	I am well aware of the progress our school has made in PLC process	1.19
1 2 3 4 0.0% 6.5% 30.4% 63.0%	I am familiar with the goals, mission, and values of our staff	1.20
1 2 3 4 8.7% 4.3% 32.6% 54.3%	The PLC committee members are a diverse representation of our faculty	1.21
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 2.2% 97.8%	I believe all of the employees in our school can play a role in the success of our school	1.22
1 2 3 4 2.2% 2.2% 15.2% 80.4%	I feel support from the administration in our collaborative efforts	1.23
1 2 3 4 17.8% 8.9% 24.4% 48.9%	I have identified areas of concern on tested items with my colleagues and am trying to use data from tests to drive my curriculum	1.24
1 2 3 4 4.4% 0.0% 26.7% 68.9%	I feel successful in teaching my students	1.25
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 26.1% 73.9%	I look forward to coming to work every day	1.26
1 2 3 4 69.6% 8.7% 15.2% 6.5%	I sometimes feel it is a waste of time to do my best as an employee in this school	1.27
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 28.3% 71.7%	I feel satisfied with my job in this school	1.28
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 19.6% 80.4%	I can count on most of my colleagues and staff members to help out anywhere, anytime – even though it may not be a part of their official assignment	1.29
1 2 3 4 0.0% 4.3% 26.1% 69.6%	I feel accepted and respected as a colleague by most staff members	1.30
1 2 3 4 0.0% 0.0% 23.9% 76.1%	There is a great deal of cooperative effort among staff members	1.31
1 2 3 4 0.0% 2.2% 41.3% 56.5%	This school seems like a big family; everyone is close and cordial	1.32
1 2 3 4 0.0% 6.5% 45.7% 47.8%	Our school has a climate of trust and openness	1.33

Scale	Statement	Mean
1 2 3 4 0.0% 6.7% 44.4%47.8%	Our school has open and honest communication	1.34
1 2 3 4 0.0% 6.5% 39.1%54.3%	Our school has a shared vision of success that everyone has agreed to and everyone is committed to its success	1.35
1 2 3 4 2.2% 6.7% 46.7%44.4%	Our school has a high ability to self-correct	1.36
1 2 3 4 4.4% 26.7%46.7%22.2%	Decision making in our school is by consensus	1.37
1 2 3 4 9.1% 15.9%43.2%31.8%	I feel like I have a say in the collaboration proceedings in our school	1.38
1 2 3 4 4.4% 11.1%31.1%53.3%	I have participative leadership in this school – what I say in my collaborative group is considered	1.39
1 2 3 4 0.0% 2.2% 37.8%60.0%	I believe our school is headed in the right direction through collaborative efforts with PLC's	1.40

Please share any comments, if you wish, on any issue of your concern *or* praise with our PLC at our school below:

(6 comments were noted from surveys and are listed below)

Professional learning communities will bring about the changes we need to make to ensure student success, teacher accountability, and learning equality.

Thanks for letting me participate.

I think after the state assessments, that data (combined with map scores) will drive my curriculum and instruction for next year. We're on our way!! I love the weekly collaboration time built into the school day. It seems effortless to attend the meeting. Thank you!

I enjoy working with my collegues. I don't want to see the PLC turned into "us" against "them." Let's all work together to reach our goals. Everyone's vote should count.

The overwhelming comment that I hear from non-plc members is "PLC was not a consensus decision, nor was focus." However, people are willing to give it their best effort.

Hi Lenn! Thanks for providing this opportunity!

APPENDIX K

PARENT LETTER FOR PROVIDING INFORMATION ON DOUBLE ENROLLMENT

December 12, 2005

Dear Parents:

Maize South is committed to helping every student find success in the classroom. However, despite every effort on our part, some students are not finding that success. For that reason, a new strategy will be tried beginning with the 3rd nine weeks.

Students who have repeatedly been in Focus EnCor and are still not passing their classes will have their schedules changed to allow them more time with their core teachers. We will move these students out of their elective classes and provide more time for them with their core teachers. For example, if a student is repeatedly failing English we would drop their art class and replace it with another English class with the same teacher. The student would only receive a grade for one of the English classes, but would have double the time with the teacher to get additional help and complete homework.

Please be reminded that this change will only affect those students who have been in Focus EnCor often. The counselors spoke with the students last week, and the students will be given the opportunity to get their grades up to a passing level before the end of the semester if they want to avoid the class changes. If a student does lose their electives they can earn them back by getting their grades to a passing level before the end of the 3rd 9 weeks.

We recognize that this idea is new, and can be quite confusing. If you have any questions about this new strategy to help our students be successful please contact us.

Sincerely,

XXXXXXX, Principal

APPENDIX L

PROBLEMS, ISSUES, AND SOLUTIONS INCURRED BY THE PROFESSIONAL
LEARNING COMMUNITY

Problem 1: Students who come to Focus Encor without homework from teachers.
Issues: No homework leads to low productivity from students and no means to help. Increased discipline problems are also reported.
Solution: Students are sent back to referring teachers when they show up without homework.

Problem 2: Large numbers of students occur at the beginning of each grading period.
Issues: Are the students failing due to illness or missing work? Is Focus being used as a tool to punish students who have been sick and need time to complete work?
Solution: Absent students should go to individual teachers during regular Encor period. Teachers should not "pawn" students who are not normally at risk for failure onto the Focus Encor. Students needing make-up work should not be referred to Focus Encor.

Problem 3: Students placed in Focus Encor for non-academic reasons; failure to turn in required signature forms or "simple" assignments.
Issues: Focus Encor should be for students needing remedial help to increase their learning or for completing essential curricular work.
Solution: Teachers must use discretion when placing students in Focus Encor who are struggling academically due to failure to turn in content related assignments or turn in poor quality work. Teachers should only grade essential curricular related items.

Problem 4: Are Focus Encor teachers experiencing "burn-out"?
Issues: Focus Encor teachers are sometimes overwhelmed in trying to help students individually during weeks that the numbers of students are large.
Solution: Focus Encor teachers have a strong belief system and are committed to the work involved. At least one teacher from each department volunteered to assist in the following year. Teachers frequently volunteer to help cover when asked to help with Focus Encor.

Problem 5: Should the students who are double-enrolled still come to Focus Encor.
Issues: Is double enrollment the next intervention above Focus Encor? Redundancy problems can occur when students are enrolled in a class twice per day and then be placed in Focus Encor.
Solution: Keep the students double enrolled in the Focus classroom to monitor work.

Problem 6: Overload in Focus Encor during collaboration days.
Issues: There are not enough teachers to properly supervise students.
Solution: All personnel including support staff, administration, and available teachers voluntarily cover to help out.

Problem: On days in which large numbers of students are placed in Focus Encor, Focus teachers spend a large amount of time taking roll and looking for misplaced students.
Issues: Lost instructional time and calling students over intercom is disruptive.
Solution: Teachers need to remind students of placement in Focus Encor and large groups can be split into more than one classroom for attendance.

Problem: Working with students in non-content area is difficult when teachers don't provide work.
Issues: Lost productive time for students and discipline issues.
Solution: Send students back to referring teacher.

Problem: Teachers wanting to keep failing students off the Focus list so the student can come to them.
Issues: This is not fair to other students who are on the list and are prevented from school participation in sports, etc.
Solution: Teachers must still place students on the Focus list to stay consistent with school policy. Teachers can still request students in Focus to go to them for assistance.